

**Joint Oversight Hearing on  
Juvenile Homicides in the District of Columbia**

**Committee on Education, Libraries and Recreation  
The Honorable Kathy Patterson, Chair**

**Committee on the Judiciary  
The Honorable Phil Mendelson, Chair**

**Committee on Human Services  
The Honorable Adrian Fenty, Chair**

**Council of the District of Columbia**



**Testimony of  
Charles H. Ramsey  
Chief of Police  
Metropolitan Police Department**

**January 31, 2005**

Chairpersons Mendelson, Patterson and Fenty, members of the Committees, staff and guests – I want to thank you for holding this Joint Oversight Hearing on a topic of such critical importance to our city and to our city’s future. And thank you for the opportunity to present this opening statement. As is customary, my statement is posted on our Department’s website: [www.mpd.cdc.gov](http://www.mpd.cdc.gov).

My testimony today serves two purposes: first, to provide information on the nature and extent of the problem of juvenile homicides in the District; and second, to briefly outline the Metropolitan Police Department’s strategies for combating youth crime and violence. That said, I think it is important for to remember that the police are just one part of the solution to the problem we face. Just as there are several Council committees looking at this problem – and I applaud you for your comprehensive approach – there are also many agencies and organizations that are working on finding and implementing solutions.

The MPD recognizes that intervention and prevention offer our best hope for reducing and preventing youth violence over the long term. That’s not to say that enforcement of the law in the short term is not important. Enforcement is – and always will be – a critical component of our violence reduction strategies. The MPD certainly recognizes this, and we are working with our partners, inside and outside the government, to develop and implement the full range of strategies – enforcement, intervention and prevention – that will have a positive impact on juvenile homicides.

But to develop strategies that are comprehensive, complementary and, ultimately, successful, we need to understand the nature and extent of the problem. To assist in this regard, the MPD has prepared a summary analysis of juvenile homicides in the District from 2002 through 2004. This report has been distributed to Councilmembers and it, too, has been posted on our website. My testimony will highlight some of the key findings.

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All of our statistics are based on the DC Code definition of a juvenile: that is, anyone age 17 or younger. During 2004, there were 24 juveniles who were murdered in the District of Columbia. That is nearly double the number of juvenile homicide victims in 2003, when there were 13, and is 41 percent higher than the 2002 total of 17. And while it was not uncommon for juvenile homicides to number three dozen or more a year during the high homicide years of the early 1990s, the spike in 2004 is stark and it is troubling.

The juvenile homicides of 2004 included a number of high-profile cases, including the deaths of Chelsea Cromartie, Princess Hansen, James Richardson, Myesha Lowe and others. They also included a number of cases that received very little attention from the news media and others in the community. But regardless of the public attention a case received, it is important for us to keep in mind that all of these homicides involved a terrible loss of life in the short term – a loss that is only compounded by the long-term price born by families, schools and entire communities.

What is most troubling and perplexing about last year’s increase in juvenile homicides is that it came during a year in which the total number of homicides in the District declined by 20 percent, to its lowest level in 18 years. In 2003, about 5 percent of all homicide victims in our city were juveniles, but in 2004, the figure was 12 percent – about one out of every eight homicide victims last year was age 17 or younger.

So at a time when every other major category of crime is trending downward, juvenile homicide has emerged as a serious crime problem in our city, and a major priority for the MPD and the District government as a whole.

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Our report takes a look at the characteristics of the victims of juvenile homicide – information that is essential for developing effective violence reduction strategies.

As with adult homicides in DC, the majority of juvenile homicide victims are black males. In the case of juveniles, most are ages 15 to 17. However, the 2004 data did reveal two troubling facts. First, an increase in “younger” victims – eight of last year’s victims were age 14 or younger. And second, an increase in the number of female victims – 38 percent of juvenile homicide victims last year were girls; among all homicide victims, females make up fewer than 11 percent of victims.

These two findings are explained, in part, by another troubling statistic from 2004: five of the nine female victims were infants or young children who died at the hands of family members or caregivers. Three of the victims died as a result of blunt trauma, one from shaken-baby syndrome and one from methadone intoxication. Tragically, we have already had two such “baby death” homicides so far in 2005 – these are the only two juvenile homicides so far this year.

To support the investigation of these cases as well as other serious crimes involving very young children, the MPD created the Special Victims Unit within our Violent Crimes Branch. During 2004, this unit achieved a 100 percent closure rate on homicides – identifying and arresting suspects in each of the five cases. I am very proud of the hard work, dedication and success of our Special Victims Unit. But I am also saddened by the fact that this unit has had so many homicides to investigate in recent months. In finding solutions to the problem of “juvenile homicide” as a whole, it is clear that we must not forget about preventing acts of violence against very young children – violence that is most often committed by parents, other family members or caregivers.

Sixteen of the 24 juvenile homicide victims in 2004 were ages 15 to 17, which remains the highest-risk age group. All but two of these victims were black males, and the other two were black females. In fact, all 24 of the juvenile homicide victims last year were black – a finding that I find disturbing not only as a police professional but also as an African-American resident of this city. This finding is critically important for government agencies and our community partners, as we work to tailor intervention and prevention strategies to the youth and families in the neighborhoods we serve.

Another important factor we must consider is the extent of the victims’ prior contacts with the juvenile justice system. Of the 16 victims in the 15-17 age group, we found that 10 of them had prior arrests (as did one of the younger victims). Some victims had had multiple contacts with the juvenile justice system. This information is useful to the courts, social service agencies and others who are working to develop intervention strategies. It seems obvious that we need to make better use of our early interventions with youth who are in the juvenile justice system, if we are to be successful in preventing future crimes and future victimizations involving these young people.

Some of last year's juvenile homicide victims were deliberately targeted, while others – tragically – were the unintended victims of violence directed at others. We also know that some of the victims were themselves engaged in high-risk behavior – for example, in possession of illegal drugs, riding in a stolen car or, in the case of six victims, in apparent violation of DC's curfew law. As I will discuss later, enforcement of the curfew has become a priority of the MPD and, along with truancy enforcement, an important element of our youth violence prevention strategy. My point here is that in order to prevent some juvenile homicides, we must find better and more effective ways of keeping young people away from the high-risk behaviors that can increase their chances of being victimized in the first place.

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In addition to examining juvenile homicide victims, we also took a look at the offenders.

Of the 24 juvenile homicides in 2004, 16 cases have been solved. Fourteen were closed with an arrest in 2004, one was closed exceptionally in 2004, and one exceptionally in January 2005. This includes closures in all five of the deaths involving family violence against infants or young children. In three of these cases, the suspect is the victim's mother; in one case, an adult caregiver; in one case, a juvenile sibling. In the other 11 homicides from 2004 that have been closed, six of the suspects are adults, and five are juveniles.

So while juveniles are still more likely to die at the hands of adults, the problem of juvenile-on-juvenile violence is significant and may be growing. There was only one such case in 2003 and two in 2002.

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Our report also analyzes information about the crimes themselves – location, time and manner. Again, the analysis reveals some interesting, though not always surprising, findings that should help inform our enforcement, intervention and prevention strategies as we move forward.

As with adult homicides, most juvenile homicides occur in the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh police districts. These three districts accounted for three-quarters of the juvenile homicides in 2004 and 92 percent in 2003.

As for when juvenile homicides occur, there is no clear trend regarding the time of year, although the vast majority of these crimes do take place during the school year – from September to June. From 2002 through 2004, only one out of seven juvenile homicides occurred during July and August, so we are not dealing with a spike in lethal violence when school is out of session. In fact, 18.5 percent of juvenile homicides over the last three years occurred in the month of May, in sharp contrast to the pattern of overall homicides.

What does seem apparent is that violence involving young people often begins in the neighborhood and spills over to the schools – or begins in the schools and spills over to the neighborhood. Last year's shooting of James Richardson inside Ballou Senior High School is a tragic example of this phenomenon. This school year, the MPD increased the number of School Resource Officers in our schools from 72 to 99, along with adding 14 supervisors. And we have been working on protocols to improve information sharing and coordination among SROs and other security personnel inside our

schools and the PSA officers in our neighborhoods, so that we can better interrupt and prevent these “spillover” crimes.

While juvenile homicides occur during almost every hour of the day, a significant proportion – 39 percent over the past three years – take place between 9 pm and 12 midnight. Another 17 percent occurred during the after-school hours (3 pm-7 pm), although there was only one homicide in 2004 during this time period. What these data indicate is that youth violence prevention must be a round-the-clock initiative, not simply an after-school undertaking. And we must pay special attention to young people who are out late at night. Over the last three years, eight juveniles were killed during curfew hours, including six who were in apparent violation of the curfew law, which currently applies to young people under the age of 17.

As with adult homicides, the vast majority of juvenile homicides are committed with firearms. Excluding the five young children who died as a result of trauma (or, in one case, a drug overdose), all but one of the 19 other juvenile victims in 2004 were shot to death. So firearm violence involving young people remains a very serious concern. And through initiatives such as Project Safe Neighborhoods, we must redouble our efforts at combating gun violence affecting people of all ages.

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While the bulk of my testimony has dealt with the nature and extent of the problem, I do want to spend some time discussing the MPD’s strategies for reducing juvenile homicides. For law enforcement does play a critical role in youth violence prevention, and that role goes well beyond reactive policing and after-the-fact investigations. The MPD is very much involved in intervention and prevention efforts, and we are committed to working with our partners in government and community on these interagency efforts.

Of course, enforcement is an important and necessary component of any violence reduction strategy. For the MPD, this means more than investigating crimes that have already occurred and bringing offenders to justice, although that is central to our mission. It also means using enforcement of the law as a way to intervene with juvenile offenders early on, when they may be involved with less serious crime, so that we might prevent these young people from becoming involved in more serious offenses later in their lives.

This strategy is reflected in our activities over the past year. Overall, juvenile arrests increased by more than 20 percent in 2004, with a particular emphasis on arrests for unauthorized use of a vehicle, narcotics violations, various misdemeanors, and other potential “gateway” crimes. But while arrests are important, arrests without aggressive prosecution and follow-up will never be effective. When juvenile arrests are not followed by certain, quick and progressive sanctions, our young people get the message that they can get away with crime. For enforcement of the law to be part of an effective intervention strategy, then probation, parole and juvenile diversion programs must be real, robust and effective.

As I mentioned earlier, we have also increased our emphasis on curfew and truancy enforcement. With the opening on July 30 of two curfew centers that are providing services to the young people who are brought there, the MPD stepped up its curfew enforcement strategy. The result: officers initiated more than 1,200 curfew violations in 2004. So curfew enforcement is both a strategy to

reduce crimes committed by and against juveniles, as well as another opportunity at intervention.

We have also stepped up our enforcement of truancy – and for exactly the same reasons: to reduce the opportunity for crime and victimization, and to provide another opportunity for intervention services. So far this school year, MPD officers have brought more than 2,400 truants to DCPS truancy centers – that compares with only 1,460 truants during all of the 2003-2004 school year.

Enforcement and intervention are also the goals of the Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative we have launched in partnership with the US Attorney’s Office, the Office of the DC Attorney General, and the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency. Project Safe Neighborhoods is based on Harvard professor David Kennedy’s concept of “pulling levers.” The project works to prevent violence – among both juveniles and adults – by identifying the city’s gangs and crews that are most likely to commit violent crimes based on current intelligence. The project reaches out directly to members of these groups, setting clear standards for their behavior, and backing up that message by “pulling every lever” legally available when those standards are violated.

The first phase of the Project took place in Sursum Corda, with a wave of arrests and a crackdown on violent offenders. Then in January, a mandatory “call-in” was held with offenders on conditional release who are known to be involved with violent groups in other parts of the city – in the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh Districts. The arrests and resulting prosecutions in Sursum Corda were used to as an example to the call-in group that gun violence committed by any individual will be met with the strictest sanctions. The PSN partner agencies will be meeting tomorrow to debrief and plan the next steps. But the initial results are encouraging. Violent crime in the Sursum Corda “hot spot” is down 40 percent over the past year.

The MPD remains actively involved in other citywide initiatives, including the Child Fatality Review Committee, the multidisciplinary investigation teams for child abuse, and the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council’s Truancy Working Group, among others. In addition, the Gang Intervention Partnership we created 18 months ago, in response to a spike in gang violence involving Latino youth in Northwest, has been highly successful in combating this problem. In ROC-East, the MPD’s gang violence prevention strategy involves a successful collaboration between the MPD’s Conflict Resolution Teams, the Department of Parks and Recreation’s Roving Leaders, the DC Public Schools, and the East of the River Clergy-Police-Community Partnership. Last year this collaboration resulted in the “Girlfriend to Girlfriend” summit involving more than 160 young women from 10 major female gangs.

The MPD is also leading a number of other important prevention and intervention initiatives. These include our Youth Advisory Councils, the “DC Fashion Idol” program that is currently under way, “40 Days of Increased Peace,” Metropolitan Police Boys and Girls Clubs, late-night basketball and football, and numerous ongoing and ad hoc efforts in all seven police districts.

The important point is that these are not simply “feel-good” initiatives, but rather aggressive and creative approaches to combating youth crime and violence on many levels.

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In closing, let me say something that you will probably hear a lot today: youth violence is a very

complex problem. And to address the problem effectively and for the long-term, we must understand the nature and extent of the problem, and we must recognize and remove obstacles that get in our way of working together.

One such obstacle is the limits on sharing data about juveniles across agencies. There are laws and policies today that prevent MPD from sharing certain offender and victim information with our partners, and that also prevent other agencies from sharing information with us and with one another. If we are to fully understand the problem of juvenile violence – and if we are to ultimately succeed in addressing the problem – we must be able to share information more easily across agencies, when sharing is in the best interests of the child and the community.

Because youth violence is such a complex problem, it requires the efforts of much more than just the police – that is a theme that I also hope you will hear over and over again today. The MPD has a central role to play. We understand that role. And we are working hard to fulfill that role through both our enforcement efforts – with an emphasis on combating less-serious, “gateway” crimes – as well as our leadership and partnership in various intervention and prevention strategies.

Thank you very much.